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How to Spread the Message of Liberal Judaism.

By C. G. MONTEFIORE.

A Sermon preached at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue,
January 6th, 1917.

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How to Spread the Message of Liberal Judaism.

WE read in the short book of Malachi these words : "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and men should seek teaching at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts." To-day no priests remain : we can only use the words of Malachi in the light of a far older assertion, " Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests." So far as there can to-day be any question of priesthood, the whole community must be the priests. But, if so, what is the teaching which men should seek at our mouths ? If we are messengers, what is our message ?

The questions are plain and justified, and I recently heard them put with a kind of pathetic insistence, of almost plaintive wistfulness. I was at a small propaganda meeting of the Jewish Religious Union for the advancement of Liberal Judaism, and two or three of us, including myself, had spoken about our cause and our work. One or the other of us had, perhaps too casually or conventionally, used the familiar phrase—"the message of Judaism." Then a man, in full sympathy with our movement, but not wholly satisfied with what we had said, got up, and in addition to several useful suggestions, he made an observation to the following effect. " You have spoken of the message of Judaism. But what is this message ? Most of us have some sort of notion what it is, but the notion is too often vague. It needs filling up and filling out. I think it should be carefully formulated ; it should be stated with precision and exactitude ; not too lengthily, but with adequate clearness. If this were done, if we had a simple, precise leaflet, called the Message of Judaism, we could grasp it and learn it ; we should have it by us when we wanted it. If anyone should ask us a question concerning Judaism, we could immediately reply, and reply with accuracy. If an opportunity arose, or came our way, for spreading the message, we could make use of it. We could hand the message on. We could strengthen the doubting ; we could reply to the enquiring ; we could, in fact, be messengers with a message, of which we were in no doubt or hesitation."

At the first blush, the request sounds highly reasonable. If we are messengers, we must possess a message. And if there is a message, it is surely possible for that message to be formulated in words, and not only possible, but desirable. Every religion may be presumed to have its message, and why should Judaism be more chary than other religions to express it in words? And if I nevertheless desire to show why it is doubtful whether our earnest friend's wish should be fulfilled—at any rate, in the precise form in which he wanted it—that is not because I do not sympathize with his desire, or because I do not believe that there is any message of Judaism which can be more or less accurately precipitated into words, and certainly *not* because I do not believe that Judaism has any message at all.

In order that I may put the case against myself at its worst, I will say that there are, I think, some *especial* reasons why *Liberal Judaism*, with the emphasis on this occasion upon the adjective, cannot, or should not, attempt this clear, precise and not too lengthy formulation of its message. That is putting the case against myself at its worst, because I am well aware that some people might answer and say: "You give yourself away. What the orthodox critics say of you is justified on your own confession. Your Judaism is so vague and flabby and elastic and shifting that you will not and cannot define it, that you are unable to put it down in definite propositions and statements that he who runs may read."

Well, I have not been reluctant hitherto to proclaim that *Liberal Judaism* *has* a message. But let me try to explain why, as I believe, there is a certain danger in attempting to put that message down in precise statements or in cut and dry proposition and paragraphs, numbered, perchance, from 1 to 12 or even to 13.

Liberal Judaism, as has often been said from this desk, believes in Progressive Revelation. What we mean by Progressive Revelation we have, moreover, often explained. Now because we believe in Progressive Revelation and teach it, we are reluctant to say that the following ten or thirteen propositions constitute Judaism—neither more nor less. From Moses and Amos to our own day there is a certain agreement, a certain development, which enables us to speak of the religion by the same name throughout all these generations. But together with this sameness there goes a difference. The development continues. The Judaism of 2016 will assuredly not be identical with the

Judaism of 1916. And it may even be said that the concrete definiteness which makes such an abstract statement as 'God is,' or 'God is One,' stir and move us, is just that part of the statement, when filled out in words, which is most of all subject to change. Hence our justified reluctance to attempt a too precise formulation of the message. Moreover, such a formulation is apt to become something of a dogmatic creed. We all know the creed of thirteen articles which is found in the ordinary orthodox prayer books. We should be very disinclined to set up any rival creed or formula, for the same objections which we have to the older presentation as a creed might justly be made to our own newer alternative. And within the body of Liberal Jews of to-day there are varieties. I should not like to assert that *my* conception of Liberal Judaism and of its message is necessarily more true than *your* conception, or that it will assuredly prevail in the future.

But to this reply I can hear a rejoinder. Let me express it in words. Someone might say: "You shall not elude me in this manner. Even if there are varieties, there must be agreements, and even if a presentation of the message be given which is definitely stated to be the presentation of a particular person, and which does not claim to be the final presentation of Liberal Judaism as a whole—even so, and with all these qualifications, such a presentation would be of value. Your charriness to formulate the message makes me fear that Liberal Judaism is so flimsy and gauzy and elusive that it cannot be presented in words because there is nothing to present. I fear lest the scruple to formulate the message means that there is no message to formulate."

Well to that objection I would in the first place reply by saying that, so far as I myself am concerned, leaving others to speak for themselves, I have not been altogether chary of giving my views of Liberal Judaism and of its message in a number—perhaps all too numerous—of books and essays and pamphlets. And in those writings I hope that there is set forth something substantial and even definite.

And if the rejoinder to this would be that people are very busy, and that they need and like few words rather than many words, a short and precise statement rather than elaborate discussions and disquisitions, then I would like to submit a deeper and essential difficulty though one less easy to put into words.

Let us assume that I or anybody else expresses the message of Judaism, as he conceives it, in words; that he does what is asked of him, and describes and defines Judaism in a series of propositions and statements. But here is the trouble. Even as he does so, Judaism has fled away. For Judaism (like any other religion which is worth its salt) is *not* a series of propositions. It is a spirit; it is a life. It is not expressable in words; it is only expressable in human lives; in human character; in human action. Judaism has its theology: you can write out this theology; you can cut it up into paragraphs and statements. But the result is *words*: not an experience, but at the best the *record* of an experience. Judaism teaches that man ought to love God. But this proposition is not really a part of Judaism. The experience is the part of Judaism, not the statement. The love of God—the love as felt by Jews and Jewesses, as experienced by them, as translated by them into life, as worked up by them into character—that is part of Judaism no doubt, but not the *words*. Describe this love, and the deeds and the character which it causes, and the result is interesting and may be valuable, but it is not the love itself; it is only a description of the love. If I give you a careful botanical account of a certain rose—that may be accurate and valuable; but it is not the rose. It is just—words.

Here, then, is a deeper reason for a reluctance to put down the message of Judaism in a leaflet. And if you say, ‘why then ever write about Judaism at all, why write a book about it, or a treatise?’ the answer is that the shorter and more categoric the statement,—the more it inclines to a series of cut and dry propositions, or to a series of articles of faith,—the greater is the danger lest these propositions and articles should be mistaken for the real and living thing, or the intellectual assent to them substituted for, and regarded as the equivalent of, the spirit and the life. For you cannot deal with religion as you can with a mutton chop. You can, I believe, to some extent, pound the mutton chop, and condense it, and make the meat of it into a sort of pill which you can swallow at a gulp. You cannot deal like this with religion. If I say, Judaism is the love of God and the love of man, or if, quoting the old Rabbi, I say that, ‘seek God and live,’ is its essence and principle, my statement may be true, but whether as a *statement* it can be helpful, except to the mere understanding, is exceeding doubtful. So far as the *statement* is true, it is true because it is the shorthand verbal

expression of a spiritual experience, an experience which, as it were, includes heaven and earth, which controls and transfigures life, explaining all things and transforming them. To give and to receive a series of printed propositions—acceptable to, and accepted by, the understanding, the intellect—is neither to give religion nor to receive it. That is why one shrinks from trying to satisfy a demand that, on the face of it, seems so legitimate and so reasonable. One shrinks from saying: 'Here my friend, is Judaism ; here is its message; in this leaflet, in these thirteen propositions, or articles, or injunctions, which all can understand—which all can read in four or five minutes by the clock. Take them and distribute them. You can have as many copies as you like at five shillings a thousand.' We feel that what we should distribute would not be Judaism, and hardly even the message of Judaism: but only some printed words,—useful words, doubtless, and true so far as they go, but yet misleading : a description, a catalogue, an inventory, but not the spirit, the experience, the life.

Yet I would not end upon what looks like a note of negation and refusal. I would say something, in spite of all, about the message. For it might be supposed that I meant that, even if there *is* a message, we cannot convey it, and that we must always be silent. I do not mean that. I do not mean that we must always be silent in words, still less that we must be silent in our lives. For a message can be spread even without words. Nor do I mean that reading is useless, whether for others or for ourselves. We must certainly read, and so far as we have time, let us study, but, above all, so far as we can, let us *live* and let us *experience*. Or adding the object, let us live Judaism, let us experience it. And when it comes to words, I think I should be inclined to say, let us, perhaps, when opportunity offers, give to a *particular* person a *particular* message. Let us, from our own experience, in humility, but sincerity, learn how to 'speak a word in its season to him that is weary.'

That part of the message of Judaism which *you* have experienced, which *you* have felt, which has helped and inspired *you*,—that part, even as you envisage and realise it, you are best fitted to hand on. May I use, by way of metaphor, the story of David and the armour of Saul? The King gives to David his helmet, his sword, his coat of mail. But not thus arrayed can David set forth to fight with Goliath. He must employ his own simple weapons ; he must use his own experience. 'I cannot go with

these,' he says to Saul, 'for I have not proved them.' So it must be with the message and ourselves. In the Jewish message concerning God, for instance, we should read in any book or pamphlet that He is One, that He is just, compassionate, holy, that He hearkens to prayer, that He is without and within, transcendent and immanent—and so on. All very true, no doubt, and all very good. But have you *proved* these truths? That portion of them which has come *home* to you, you can best hand on to another. Is there a doubting heart to whom perchance, you, who have felt the power of prayer, may speak of its comfort? Here is the message for *you*. Is there someone to whom God seems far off, while you have found Him near? Here is the message. Is someone inclined to say, 'How can I love an invisible spirit? Yet I might love a God, who once became incarnate in man, and suffered for our sakes'?—then do you, who can and do love the Father, whose children we feel ourselves to be, you, who love Him and *feel* His love, speak of your experience, humbly, but without shyness; *this* is the message for you, and *this* is its hour. Or are there stricken souls, for whom the evil of the world is too sore and pressing and hard, and have you found a way still to believe in divine righteousness and divine love in spite of evil and suffering and anguish and sin—here is *your* message and here is *your* opportunity. Or have you felt, and do you feel, the bond of fellowship, the lesson and the appeal of history, the tie with the past: have you experienced the strength of saying 'Our God' as well as 'my God'? That, too, is the message: speak it in its season. Or have you, like all of us, sinned, but have you also, not like all of us, alas, made your repentance: have you felt the joy of atonement, or the consciousness of forgiveness; have you been given strength to crush your sin or to make a very burnt offering of your temptation? Here, too, is a part of the message, and perhaps in some quiet hour you may deliver it. Or are you a worker in some good cause of charity or social service, and have you found that this work is illumined by the faith in, and the love of, God, and that the truth of God is confirmed and illumined by this work; have you found that human love needs the strength of the divine love, and that divine love needs to flow forth into human love? This, too, is the Jewish message, and of this, too, may bear your witness.

These are just examples, and they can be easily added to. But let us always remember that more than the words is the life,

and that you, even in your humility, may be more than what you say: you, whom another may esteem, or care for, or be helped by, consciously or unconsciously, *you* may be the message *yourself*. If you are observed by another to work for man, because of your love for God, you are the message. If you suffer bravely, and gladly make a sacrifice: if you are humble and selfless,—you are the message. If, by your life, you show that the invisible Father is near you, and has helped you, and that, in spite of failures and lapses, you seek to walk as in His presence: you are the message. If it is guessed that to you the bondage of duty is freedom, and that liberty is law; that to you outward ceremonial strengthens inward faith, and that faith, inspires and glorifies observance : you are the message. ‘Speak a word in its season’ to him that would ask and hear. This means of spreading the message will come now and again, and you should welcome it when it comes. But life, so long as life is with us, must always be lived, and your *life* is the best message. Its influences pass from soul to soul. Your *life* may bear fruit which you can never guess, and the full and final value of which you may never know.

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